

## **EASA (OVSA) 2006**

### **Linking classroom practice with fundamental needs and rights of learners**

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### **Background**

Regarded in narrow terms, safety and security in education is associated with eradicating physical harm. A broader view, however, reveals any threat to a learner's well-being as a safety and security issue. As Duke (2002:xvii) points out, such an issue does not merely refer to a set of statistics as can be calculated regarding school crime and discipline. One must therefore consider a variety of perspectives when considering safety and security in education.

One of the major characteristics of Outcomes-Based Education is a paradigm shift regarding beliefs about learners, learning and teaching practices: a realization that learners learn in different ways and at different paces. The Constitution of South Africa, Act 108 of SA, 1996 (SA, 1996b; hereafter Constitution) guarantees the fundamental rights of all children and therefore of all learners. Moreover, the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996 protects both the learners' legal rights and their fundamental rights.

Education White Paper 6 (SA, 2001; hereafter White Paper) outlines how the education and training system must transform itself to establish a caring and humane society, how it must change to accommodate the full range of learning needs and the mechanisms that should be put in place.

This is where inclusion comes in. Inclusion is about acknowledging that all children have the right to education, can all learn and all need support. It is about respecting the fact that all learners are different in some way, and therefore it requires from educators a change in attitude, behaviour, teaching methodologies, assessment strategies, curricula and environments. The focus is on teaching and learning activities, with the emphasis on the development of good teaching strategies that will be of benefit to all learners (SA, 2001:17), thus ensuring their pedagogical safety and security.

Inclusion focuses on overcoming barriers in the system that prevent it from meeting the full range of learning needs. The Department of Education (2004:39) identifies the following barriers to learning:

- Pedagogical barriers that call for sufficient educator support to all learners, fair assessment procedures, flexible curricula and linking teaching to the preferred learning style of the learner.
- Medical barriers that call for attention to sensory disabilities, physical disabilities and cognitive disabilities in the classroom.
- Societal barriers that call for support to learners coming from backgrounds characterized by severe poverty, abuse, crime and violence.
- Systemic barriers that call for adequate facilities at school, the availability of appropriate teaching and learning support material and proper attention to each learner.

This article will focus on determining to what extent educators are linking their teaching to the learning style needs of the learners, while adhering to the fundamental rights of all learners and thus ensuring pedagogical safety and security.

### **Philosophies of teaching and learning**

Concern for learners is the foundation of all teaching (Gunter, Estes & Schwab, 2003:3). An important factor which impacts on the alignment of teaching practice with the needs of learners is the emerging philosophy of teaching and learning that characterizes the way in which the educator views knowledge, his/her role in the classroom, the role of the learner and the choice of teaching methods and assessment strategies.

Schraw and Olafson (2003:186) distinguish between the following philosophies:

- *The realist view* assumes that knowledge is objective and unchanging and is best acquired through transmission. Learners are viewed as passive recipients of knowledge. The focus is on transmission of knowledge and educator-centred instruction. Learning becomes a process of replicating existing knowledge, rather than constructing knowledge that is novel. Realist educators are apt to use assessments that are summative in nature and therefore focus mainly on end-of-unit tests or exams.
- *The contextualist view* assumes that learners construct shared understanding in collaborative contexts in which educators serve as facilitators (Schraw & Olafson, 2003:186; McCaslin & Hickley, 2001). These educators are not only concerned with the type of knowledge that a learner constructs, but with the process they use to construct the knowledge, and the degree to which that knowledge has authentic application. Contextualist educators tend to see themselves as collaborators in the learning process. They also assume that knowledge will change over time and that learners need skills to acquire knowledge on their own. They promote peer support and expert scaffolding in their classrooms. Contextualists are apt to use authentic assessment activities that match co-operative learning activities.
- *The relativist view* assumes that each learner constructs a unique knowledge base that is different, but equal to that of other learners (Schraw & Olafson, 2003:186). It sees knowledge as subjective and highly changeable (Cobern, 2000). Knowledge must be constructed, rather than transmitted from the educator to the student.

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that a specific view will favour a specific way of teaching and conducting assessment. However, a normal classroom will accommodate learners with many different learning styles or a combination of learning styles. Educators thus need to understand the variety of learning styles and adapt their teaching to suit the learning style needs of all the learners in the classroom in order to ensure pedagogical safety and security.

## **Learning styles**

Learning styles refer to orientations towards approaching learning tasks and processing information in different ways (Grosser, 2001:11). One of the central ideas behind Outcomes-Based Education is that learners learn differently and that we cannot expect all learners to achieve outcomes in the same way. A broad understanding of learning styles will help educators to understand and support learners throughout learning processes.

Educational psychologists have studied several differences in learning styles. This study utilizes the model of David Kolb, an American psychologist. Kolb (1984) maintains that learners can be divided into four major categories according to their preferred style of learning:

- *Convergers/sensors and feelers* prefer to learn by intuition and by being sensitive to feelings and atmosphere. They like to see, hear and feel in order to learn. They rely on experience and intuition.
- *Divergers/watchers* prefer to learn through perception and observation. They like lectures, demonstrations and similar activities where they observe.
- *Assimilators/thinkers* prefer to analyse logically and create understanding for themselves. They like to read theory and study well by themselves.
- *Accommodators/doers* prefer to learn by trying things out and are willing to take risks. They prefer practice to theory. They enjoy learning activities that enable them to do something, such as projects, tasks, discussions and similar activities.

### ***Balancing the philosophies of teaching with learning styles***

The realist, contextualist and relativist philosophies of teaching differ in a variety of important ways. The three views suggest three distinct ways of teaching and learning. Table 1 indicates, in summary form, the types of teaching and learning activities and assessment methods a specific philosophy of teaching will focus on, as well as the type of learning style they will address.

**Table 1: Linking three philosophies of teaching and learning with learning styles**

<b>Philosophy</b>	<b>Teaching and learning activities</b>	<b>Assessment activities</b>	<b>Learning style</b>
Realist view	Transmission Educator-centered instruction Lectures, presentations, drill, practice, questions, demonstrations	Tests Exams	Converger/Sensors Diverger/Watchers
Contextualist view	Transactional Group-centered Facilitation style Peer support Co-operative learning Research projects Assignments Crossword puzzles Discussions Problem-solving Surveys Design-and-make activities Debates Role plays and simulations	Authentic assessment Self assessment Discovering Exploring Experimenting Practical applications Group discussions Action, moving around Research Investigations Presentations Performance	Accommodators/Doers
Relativist view	Autonomous Individual-centered instruction Concept maps Case studies Debates Oral presentations Brain-storming activities Worksheets	Analyzing Synthesizing Assignments Graphs Diagrams Mind maps Planning	Assimilators/Thinkers

The consequent question now arises: do these philosophies of teaching and learning comply with the learners' fundamental rights, in order to promote their pedagogic safety and security?

### **The fundamental rights of learners**

Together with the international attempt at striving towards the constitutionalisation of human rights, a dynamic movement has aimed at recognizing the fundamental rights of children and therefore of learners.

Section 29(1) of the Constitution provides that every child has the right, *inter alia*, to basic education. Even though it appears that the State is primarily liable to provide these rights, in view of the fact that it is the party against whom fundamental rights are generally directed, Robinson (1995:108) and Van der Vyver (1007:306) maintain that the State's responsibility is complementary to that of the parents or their substitute and would arise only if the parent or substitute (such as the educator) is unable to do so. It is therefore clear that South African educators need to acknowledge the fundamental rights of learners.

Section 3 of the Norms and Standards for Educators, as found in the *National Education Policy Act 27 of 1996* (SA, 1996a), states the seven roles of educators. For the purpose of this article the following five are highlighted:

- ☀ The educator will mediate learning sensitive to the learners' needs.
- ☀ The educator will pace the learning sensitive to the learners' needs.
- ☀ The educator will demonstrate responsiveness to the changing needs of the learners.
- ☀ The educator will uphold the Constitution.
- ☀ The educator will know and use appropriately the different approaches to teaching and learning.

Given the above-mentioned, it is clear that classroom teaching and learning need to comply with the learning needs of learners, as well as with their fundamental human rights.

### **Statement of the problem**

Emanating from the above, the following questions are raised:

- To what extent are educators' teaching practices compatible with the pedagogic needs and fundamental rights of learners?
- Are educators able and empowered to meet the pedagogic needs and fundamental rights of all learners in their classrooms?
- If this is not the case, how can educators be assisted to meet the pedagogic needs and fundamental rights of the learners in their classrooms?

### **Aims of the study**

Using exploratory research, this study aims to establish the extent to which learners perceive the classroom practice of teachers as compatible with their pedagogical needs and fundamental rights. The overall aim can be operationalized as follows:

- Determine compatibility of teaching practices with learners' pedagogical needs and fundamental rights by distributing a questionnaire to learners.
- Determine whether educators are enabled to meet learners' pedagogical needs and fundamental rights, by means of a questionnaire distributed to learners.
- Make recommendations to help educators meet pedagogical needs and fundamental rights of the learners in classrooms, to promote their pedagogical safety and security.

### **Research design**

The researchers undertook a preliminary exploratory study which was quantitative in nature to gain practical knowledge of and insight into the emerging philosophies of teaching and learning, and to link these to the variety of teaching styles, learning styles, teaching methods and assessment strategies to meet the pedagogic needs of all learners in a classroom. Furthermore, the researchers also explored the importance of acknowledging the fundamental rights of learners.

### **Literature study**

Primary and secondary sources were utilized to gather and explore information regarding teaching philosophies, teaching methods, learning style needs, assessment methods and the fundamental rights of learners.

**Data collection instrument: Questionnaire**

A learner questionnaire required from learners to reflect critically on the teaching practice of their teachers. The questionnaire comprised six main sections, namely:

- Section 1: Biographic information
- Section 2: Teaching styles
- Section 3: Teaching methods
- Section 4: Learning styles
- Section 5: Assessment strategies
- Section 6: The importance of the fundamental rights of learners

**Population and sample**

The research was conducted in the D7 district (Vereeniging, Meyerton, Sharpeville and Heidelberg) of the Gauteng Department of Education, and involved all primary and secondary schools in the district (N =83).

The randomly selected sample comprised the following respondents:

- schools (n = 18); (9 primary schools, and 9 secondary schools)
- learners (n = 520)

**Pilot study**

Before the questionnaire was administered to the sample, a pilot study was conducted with a selected number of respondents from the target population, regarding its qualities of measurement and appropriateness and to review it for clarity. The group did not experience any difficulties in understanding what the questions requested them to do.

According to the authors' discretion, the instrument complied with reliability and validity criteria. A Cronbach Alpha test was utilized to determine the reliability of the questionnaire before it was administered. The calculated value (0,877) indicated that the questionnaire complied with reliability criteria. Validity was arrived at by considering both content validity and construct validity. The content validity is supported by the fact that the specific test items were constructed strictly according to the definition of each section. The construct validity is underpinned by the fact that



although the test focuses on different sections, they all deal with aspects which are important in meeting the pedagogic needs and fundamental rights of learners

### **Data analysis and interpretation**

The response rate for the learner questionnaire was 506 learners (97.30%) out of a possible 520 learners. Although no responses were received for several of the questions, it is not indicated in the tables representing the data obtained.

The biographical information indicates that a wide variety of learners representative of all the various grades and phases (except the foundation phase) and various age groups (ranging from 8 – 21 years of age) took part in the research.

#### *Teaching styles*

Learners were requested to indicate the % of time which their educators normally spend using the following teaching styles and these responses are indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Teaching style**

	<b>Always</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Never</b>
<b>Educator talks most of the time</b>	184 36.22%	216 42.52%	103 20.28%	1 0.20%
<b>Learners are involved, they discover and inquire</b>	136 26.77%	169 33.27%	190 37.40%	7 1.38%

The responses concerning the utilization of a particular teaching style indicate that there is a strong focus on the transmission-reception style of teaching. Against the background of the new curriculum, this does not indicate the ideal teaching and learning situation. Both the transmission-reception style of teaching as well as the facilitation style of teaching needs to be utilized on a fairly equal basis during teaching. The perceived situation implies that the entire spectrum of world views regarding teaching and learning is not represented during teaching and learning and that the variety of pedagogic needs will thus not be met.

#### *Teaching methods*

Table 3 indicates the responses of the learners where they were requested to indicate how often their educators utilize a variety of teaching methods during their teaching.

**Table 3: Utilizing teaching methods in the classroom**

	Always	%	Often	%	Some-times	%	Never	%
▪ Lectures	86	16.93	149	29.33	196	35.58	74	14.57
▪ Drilling	122	24.02	88	17.32	197	38.78	99	19.49
▪ Worksheets	190	37.40	209	41.14	101	19.88	3	0.59
▪ Presentations by educator	171	33.66	179	35.24	129	25.39	19	3.74
▪ Demonstrations by educators	181	35.63	153	30.12	150	29.53	13	2.56
▪ Constructing concept maps	32	6.30	129	25.39	256	50.39	79	15.55
▪ Case studies	86	16.93	179	35.24	201	39.57	31	6.10
▪ Making posters	47	9.25	89	17.52	293	57.68	76	14.96
▪ Oral presentations by learners	76	14.96	189	37.20	221	43.50	15	2.95
▪ Role-plays	58	11.42	105	20.67	270	53.15	68	13.39
▪ Designing	48	9.45	102	20.08	249	49.02	100	19.69
▪ Projects	98	19.29	184	36.22	185	36.42	37	7.28
▪ Field trips	18	3.54	31	6.10	244	48.03	208	40.94
▪ Experimenting	27	5.31	138	27.17	236	46.46	98	19.29
▪ Questioning	353	69.49	103	20.28	47	9.25	1	0.20
▪ Debates	64	12.60	81	15.94	247	48.62	111	21.85
▪ Surveys	22	4.33	113	22.24	226	44.49	131	25.79
▪ Crossword puzzles	30	5.91	77	15.16	300	59.06	98	19.29
▪ Co-operative learning	155	30.51	158	31.10	171	33.66	16	3.15
▪ Demonstrations by learners	43	8.46	134	26.38	268	52.76	57	11.22
▪ Brainstorming	124	24.41	159	31.30	175	34.45	47	8.46

It appears as if educators are utilizing a variety of teaching methods during teaching. A closer examination of the responses indicate a strong tendency for the utilization of methods that fit into a realist world view, namely questioning (69.49%) and demonstrations by educators (35.63%). This corresponds well with the previous responses which indicated a strong focus on the transmission-reception style of teaching. Learners are therefore viewed as passive recipients of pre-established knowledge and there is an emphasis on deliberate practise. There is however an indication that the relativist and contextual world views are also accommodated to some extent during teaching through the utilization of worksheets (37.40%) and co-operative learning (30.51%).

### *Learning styles*

Learners were requested to indicate how frequently their educators accommodate the four major learning styles through their teaching. These responses are indicated in Table 4.

**Table 4: Accommodating learning styles of learners**

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never
<b>Sensors and feelers:</b> Learning by seeing, hearing and feeling	214 42.13%	103 20.28%	137 26.97%	52 10.24%
<b>Watchers:</b> Learning by watching and observing. You like lectures and demonstrations	142 27.95%	187 36.81%	133 26.18%	44 8.66%
<b>Thinkers:</b> Learning by analysing things and creating understanding for yourself. You like to read theory and study by yourself	245 48.23%	143 28.15%	110 21.65%	8 1.57%
<b>Doers:</b> Learning by preferring practice to theory. You like to complete projects	147 28.94%	174 34.25%	158 31.10%	27 5.31%

Although all the learning styles are indicated as being accommodated during teaching, the responses to this section clearly support the relativist world view by the fact that the learning style accommodated most during teaching is that of the thinker (48.23%). This implies that the focus is on learners who like to learn by analyzing things and creating understanding for themselves. The responses to these questions contrast strongly with the responses to the previous two sections where a strong focus on the realist worldview during teaching was indicated.

### *Assessment strategies*

Learners were requested to indicate how often their educators expose them to the following variety of assessment opportunities, as indicated in Table 5.

**Table 5: Exposing learners to different assessment strategies**

	Always	%	Often	%	Sometimes	%	Never	%
▪ Analysing	113	22.24	187	36.81	187	36.81	17	3.35
▪ Synthesizing	62	12.20	147	28.15	224	44.09	64	12.60
▪ Planning	149	29.33	191	37.60	133	26.18	28	5.51
▪ Providing precise, to-the-point information	106	20.87	159	31.30	212	41.73	26	5.12

▪ Discovering and exploring	54	10.63	185	36.42	183	36.02	78	15.35
▪ Experimenting	57	11.22	124	24.41	230	45.28	92	18.11
▪ Practical applications	78	15.35	164	32.28	215	42.32	43	8.46
▪ Group discussions	148	29.13	138	27.17	193	37.99	25	4.92
▪ Action, moving around	128	25.20	88	17.32	183	36.02	102	20.08
▪ Research	125	24.61	185	36.42	175	34.45	18	3.54
▪ Investigations	90	17.72	141	27.76	233	45.87	40	7.87
▪ Assignments	197	38.78	158	31.10	141	27.76	6	1.18
▪ Tests/Exams	314	61.81	119	23.43	68	13.39	2	0.39
▪ Presentations and performances	127	25.00	145	28.54	216	42.52	12	2.36
▪ Translation tasks: graphs, diagrams, mind maps	83	16.34	119	23.43	255	50.20	41	8.07

In support of the dominance of the realist world view in two of the previous sections, it is not surprising that the most utilized methods of assessment are tests and exams (61.81%). Assessment strategies in support of the relativist world view, namely assignments (38.78%) and planning (29.33%) and group discussions (29.13%) that support the contextualist world view are also indicated as assessment strategies utilized by educators.

It is evident that there is an absence of balance between the three world views in the choice of assessment strategies by educators. This implies that there is a stronger focus on assessment strategies favoured by learners who are convergers and divergers.

Faced with demands for increased classroom control, educators may begin to plan instruction and choose assessment strategies to discourage misbehaviour, rather than to promote learning and meeting the needs and rights of learners (Kagan, 1992).

#### *The importance of the fundamental rights of learners*

As reflected in Table 6, learners were requested to rate specific aspects in order of priority on a scale of 1 (the most important) to 15 (the least important).

**Table 6: The expected rating of learners' fundamental rights**

Expected rating		Learner rating	%
2	Safeguarding the interests of the learner	28	5.51

6	Protecting the dignity of all learners	11	2.17
13	Enforcing school rules	18	3.56
14	Coping with the work	108	21.26
15	Adhering to practices that have been proven	125	24.61
10	Organizing the portfolios of all learners	11	2.17
11	Maintaining the workload efficiently	9	1.77
12	Managing personal stress levels	20	3.94
9	Advancing the diverse cultures of learners	8	1.57
4	Protecting learners' right to education	40	7.87
3	Upholding the fundamental rights of learners	37	7.28
5	Pacing learning according to different needs of learners	7	1.38
8	Responding to the educational needs of learners without discrimination	8	1.58
7	Using different approaches to teaching and learning appropriately	17	3.35
1	"Protecting the best interest of the child"	25	4.93

It is disconcerting to note from the responses that some of the most important aspects in dealing with the pedagogical needs of learners, namely "protecting the best interest of the child", safeguarding the interests of the learner and upholding the fundamental rights of the learner are not ranked as important. This outcome is supported by the fact that the choice of teaching methods and assessment strategies clearly favour the needs and interests of a particular group of learners only.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Although exploratory in nature, this research voices a number concerns from learners regarding classroom teaching and learning

The first aim of this study was to determine the compatibility of teaching practices with the pedagogic needs and fundamental rights of learner. This study indicates that philosophies of teaching and learning are not yet compatible with the emerging needs and rights of learners. When educators know how to handle learning styles, they might be able to avoid the problems above, endorse learner performance and competency, and increase learners' pedagogical safety and security.

The second aim of the study was to determine whether educators are empowered to meet the pedagogic needs and fundamental rights of the learners in their classrooms, and this study indicates that educators are not yet empowered to do so. These results sound a warning in that inclusive education might become an unrealized dream in time. By being trained concerning the importance of meeting the pedagogical needs and fundamental rights of all the learners and by practicing this skill, educators may be able to face this challenge successfully

The third aim of the study was to make recommendations to assist educators in meeting the pedagogical needs and fundamental rights of the learners in their classrooms in order to promote their pedagogical safety and security. Firstly, educator training programmes should prepare educators to become reflective practitioners. Secondly, the professional development of in-service educators needs to deepen their understanding of the processes of teaching and learning and of the learners they teach. Thirdly, educator pre-set-training and in-service training need to focus on the need to recognize the fundamental rights of all the learners.

If there is only a focus on the realist philosophy of teaching and learning, then safety and security will not be increased in education, as such a one-sided focus will not balance evolving teaching and learning philosophies with learners' fundamental pedagogic needs and rights.

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